

Apostolicity and Episcopacy in the Lutheran Episcopal Dialogue

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No issue was as critical in the Lutheran Episcopal Dialogue that eventually resulted in the unity reflected in Called to Common Mission, as did the question of episcopacy and “apostolic succession.” Indeed these issues had profoundly divided Lutherans and Anglicans/Episcopalians since at least the middle of the 17th century. For centuries Anglicans had viewed Lutherans as a church without a full and adequate nature of ministry, while Lutherans viewed Anglicans as persons far more interested in church polity than in the larger implications of the gospel. However, through a series of ecumenical conversations, both among the international communities and between the representative churches in the United States, the impasse was broken through new and richer understandings, and a fruitful new common ground was claimed. Although there are differences between Lutheran-Episcopal issues and the ones at present between Methodists and Episcopalians, it is believed that the work of the members of these dialogues may provide a pattern for the present Methodist/Episcopal discussion and lead to a move towards full communion.

The Niagara Report (1987)

A) Apostolic Succession and episcopate:

Lutherans and Episcopalians (on both the national and international levels) were able to rather easily come to agreement concerning fundamental doctrine. As the earlier Helsinki Report (1982) observed, there was such agreement in doctrine, worship, mission and understanding and function of the ministry that “there are no longer any serious obstacles on the way towards establishment of full communion between our two churches.” (3). Yet, they continued, issues of ecclesiology, and particularly the issues of apostolicity and episcopate remained. These issues were taken up by an international dialogue in The Niagara Report: Report of the Anglican-Lutheran Consultation on Episcopate (1987) the authors recognized that these issues had to be addressed since they were “regarded as the chief obstacle to full communion” (2). Hence two issues in particular were to be addressed: 1) the shedding light on the relationship between the topics of apostolic succession, the ministry of the whole people of God, and episcopacy and the historic episcopate, and 2) the evaluation in the light of contemporary ecumenical dialogues of the current practice of episcopate among Lutherans and Anglicans. The authors acknowledged that there were clear differences in the practice of episcopate, or how oversight was maintained in the two traditions, but, the real question was were these differences ultimately church divisive in nature, and could they be overcome.

B) The Nature of episcopate:

Lutherans and Anglicans agreed that a pastoral ministry of episcopate served a number of goals. Among these were doxology (or the offering of praise to God), continuity (or the faithfulness of the church), the disciplined life together (or the interrelationship of discipline and obedience), nurture and faithfulness to the goal of human history given in Jesus Christ (or the church's role in being faithful to Christ's call to feed his sheep). Likewise there was a recognition that from early on in Christian history, the office of episcopate had a special role in this episcopate, particularly as a symbol of unity. The episcopate, it came to be argued, served as a tool for unity both across distances of time (diachronic catholicity), and space (synchronic catholicity). Hence Episcopate and episcopacy existed within the church.

C) Impact of Earlier Ecumenical Understandings:

In much of these reflections the participants were assisted by the insights of the World Council of Churches report Baptism Eucharist and Ministry (Faith and Order Paper, NO. 111, 1982), particularly the recognition that no single pattern of ministry predominated in the first ages of the church. Accordingly "study of the life of the early Christian communities reflected in the pages of the New Testament should make it unthinkable for us to isolate ordination at the hands of someone in linear succession to the apostles as the only criterion of faithfulness to the apostolic commission". (20) Apostolic succession, it continued, is a characteristic of the whole church, and cannot be reduced to one criterion of discernment. Furthermore the essence of apostolicity is mission, "apostolicity means that the Church is sent by Jesus to be for the world." (21) It is for service to the gospel, or the "self-offering" for the life of the world and not for institutional "self-preservation." (23) Finally, following BEM, the Niagara Report emphasized that bishops are ultimately signs of continuity (along with Scripture, confession, etc.). But just as God can (and does) grant continuity when these signs are abused or undervalued (such as when the sacraments are undervalued, or the Scripture is abused), one cannot presuppose any loss of continuity when one is absent within a given religious community. The history of the church is a history of God's faithfulness in spite of human faithlessness. (29)

Implications of the Gospel (1988)

As a result of the international Niagara Report, Lutherans and Episcopalians were able to make important progress overcoming divisions. A key issue was the relationship of episcopacy to the gospel. This involved the wider question of the relationship between polity and the gospel. Many Lutherans believed that the Anglican insistence upon the historic episcopacy as part of the true church was an inappropriate addition to the essence of the gospel and as such in clear violation of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Implications of the Gospel (Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue, Series

III, 1988) directly addressed this issue. As the authors noted, the mission of the gospel involved two commands that come from Christ himself: to be sent out (apostollein), and to serve (diakonein). (53). Mission and servanthood lie at the heart of the gospel. Both involve the church as a body or community. Polity then ultimately is not simply (or most profoundly) about governance, but rather it “testifies to the fact that the gospel gives life to a visible, historical community. (52). Polity is not an addition to the gospel but is that life together that is essential for the true and proper witnessing to the gospel in all of its power. Anything less fails to do the gospel justice.

“Toward Full Communion” and “Concordat of Agreement”

All of these principles came together in “Toward Full Communion” and Concordat of Agreement (Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue, Series III, 1991). Toward Full Communion built upon previous understandings. The insight of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry was regularly appealed to. In particular, two of the famous phrases of B.E.M. took preeminence. The first was that Episcopal succession is “a sign, but not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the church.” The second was that “churches that have preserved the Episcopal succession are asked to recognize both the apostolic content of the ordained ministry which exists in churches which have not maintained such succession and also the existence in these churches of a ministry of episcopate in various forms.”(Both cited in 11). Thus the normative nature of the historic episcopate was acknowledged, yet the existence of apostolicity and true episcopate of other churches is acknowledged. Apostolicity and the historic episcopate were not identical. The historic episcopate was but one way (albeit the most common way) of assuring apostolic identity. Yet there was still a recognition of the importance of the historic episcopate. “Towards Full Communion” acknowledges that there existed both a functional and an ontological understanding of the nature of episcopacy. The latter was traditionally the “high church” (or normatively Anglican understanding) and the latter was the predominantly Lutheran view. This difference had historically been a point of impasse. But this too was now being overcome. “increasingly within both churches, ordination—and even the office of bishop—is being seen by historians, theologians, and others as being functional in origin and ontological upon reflection.” (13).

Conclusion:

All of these new understandings took the discussion of episcopate, apostolicity, and episcopacy out of the realm of history and placed it in the vision of what a future church might look like. The shift from an historical discussion (all too often involving blame and recrimination) to one of a future vision for the sake of mission, provided a path to go beyond historic differences. Such was the better way, for, as the ecumenist and historian J. Robert Wright noted, “Is it not possible to find a way forward that does not necessitate judgments upon the past and the present?” (10). This insight paved the way for the recognition of ministry that under girds Called to

Common Mission. In that document, it was stated that once there was an agreement about the future of the common office of episcopacy there was to be a recognition of “the full interchangeability and reciprocity of all Evangelical Lutheran Church pastors as priests or presbyters [in the Episcopal Church], and all Evangelical Lutheran Church deacons as deacons in the Episcopal Church with out any further ordination, re-ordination, or supplemental ordination whatsoever.” (5) The Episcopal Church also agreed to temporarily suspend the Preface to its Ordinal to allow for present Methodist clergy to serve in Episcopal churches. This plan allowed for a gradual growing together of Lutheran and Episcopal ministries as Lutheran and Episcopal bishops would begin to participate in joint ordinations, and to permit full communion while this was being accomplished. Such a creative solution may indeed be the direction Methodists and Episcopalians need to take at present to help bring about the gift of full communion.